

Review of *The Breaks: An Essay* by Julietta Singh (Coffee House Press)

by Pavithra Suresh | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Book Reviews

ABSTRACT Julietta Singh uses an epistolary tradition to meditate on pressing challenges in the contemporary moment. She fixates on a resounding theme: how must we break from existing systems to truly center the most vulnerable in our institutions and epistemologies? In a long-form letter to her six-year-old daughter, Singh reflects on queer life and architecture, family trauma, radicalization, and collective mobilization.

KEYWORDS feminism, queer, ethnography, parenting, memoir

The Breaks: An Essay. By Julietta Singh. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2021, 168 pp. (paperback). ISBN 978-1-5668-9616-0. US List: \$16.95.

In the stark dog days following the United States Supreme Court overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, many of my feminist colleagues and I have found ourselves scrambling to answer the questions: How do we resist? How do we navigate a world hostile to our bodies? How might we reconfigure ourselves to support the most vulnerable? Julietta Singh's monograph-length essay *The Breaks* offers a series of meditations on these questions and more, including a way forward. Singh's essay, penned to her young daughter, ruminates on the messy realities of "learning to mother at the end of the world" (3). Her epistolary form contributes meaningfully to this thesis; similar to works like Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche's *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, Singh buttresses her work with reflections on key moments in her daughter's upbringing in the late 2010s and early 2020s. For example, early in the essay, Singh meditates on the questions her daughter asks about Thanksgiving mythologies and the darker, obscured reality of the holiday. Critiquing a "manicured version of history that keeps European whiteness at its center" (2), Singh expresses an urgency to "scramble to harvest alternative histories omitted by the textbooks, the histories of those who have faced annihilation and lived toward survival" (3). She grapples with a desire to make her daughter feel safe but also "needing [her] to know that the earth and its inhabitants are facing a catastrophic crisis" (3).

Through autoethnographic prose, Singh takes us through the existential questions that arise, particularly for those of us who emerge “from the subjugated ends of history, who [stand] outside of whiteness but [are] also saturated by its power” (9). Citing the urgency of James Baldwin’s “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to my Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation” and Coates’ work, Singh reports that she “writes not with the immediate fear that you will be gunned down by police in the streets, or that you will be metabolized by the prison industrial complex, but with an adjacent set of fears about being a Brown girl in a country that thinks and feels race through a sharp binary” (11), delving into an uncomfortable recognition of the ways that whiteness compels us into silence and complicity.

Unlike a conventional monograph, *The Breaks* avoids rigid structure; the essay flows as a stream of consciousness, creating opportunity for meaningful tangents and parallels to emerge between seemingly disparate topics. The unconfined form of Singh’s writing, along with her cascading prose, translates anecdotes to the larger purpose of Singh’s work. Engaging theory and anecdote with equal validity, *The Breaks* moves through topics including Singh’s journey to motherhood, queer life and architecture, violent family histories, disablement, racial trauma, police brutality, and collective mobilization. Nonetheless, the essay is anything but unfocused, as the meandering narrative centers intentionally on opportunities for her daughter to learn from yet break from many of the theories and traumas of Singh’s life and the dominant systems that produced those experiences. For example, when discussing the harm of epistemologies rooted in colonialism, Singh encourages her daughter to continue to play with language and theory: “I try to teach you against my own teaching, to reanimate a world of flourishing animacies I have almost lost” (14). Singh demonstrates this strategy when telling the story of the 2017 Women’s March in Washington, DC, during which her then-four-year-old daughter instructs what should go on their sign: “No Walls; No Meanies; More Girls!” She basks in awe of her child: “It’s as though you are learning the present and the future all at once, undeterred by the magnitude of each” (107).

Fundamentally, Singh’s essay engenders multiple opportunities for resisting systems of domination. She questions the economic reductionism of existing leftist configurations for revolution, musing “shouldn’t the immediate threat of human extinction trump the Marxist formulation of class revolution?” (21). Singh recognizes that the ways she was raised, and indeed even the ways she is raising her daughter, may not be compatible with the emergent strategies for global transformation as major economic, social, and political systems must be reconfigured in her daughter’s lifetime. She imparts to her child that “more than any other time in history, what you choose from the past will need to be meticulously studied and selected,” (22) suggesting that her daughter “find a way to break *with* me rather than to break *from* me” (23). In her impassioned prose, Singh impresses the

necessity of the eponymous breaks, that another world will never be possible unless we break from the one that has raised us.

The Breaks models the paradigm shifts that Singh hopes her daughter will navigate. Singh flows from expressing the urgency of this work to where the project, and her daughter, can find their origins by tracing the relationship between Singh and her daughter's father, Nathan. Breaking from the pressures of heteronormativity, Singh articulates their relationship as "*friends-in-love*" (37) despite passing under conventional standards of legibility. Yet, Singh and Nathan continue to break down heteronormative arrangements and queer them, reconfiguring their home through the framework of "*adjacent living . . . wrestl[ing] with whether to call [their] experiment an act of *living together apart*, or of *living apart together*" (42). Queering their living spaces leads Singh to examine the dominant societal norms and narratives baked into architecture. Singh reflects on how the built environment is structured by history, noting how "in the American South, the architectures that have housed us are imprinted with histories of slavery and racialized servitude" (50). She considers the points of divisions in these spaces themselves, wherein "some bodies move through and around [these] space[s] comfortably, while others are made to feel alien" (50–1).*

Just as violent histories inform the spaces where they occurred, Singh notes how violent experiences inform one's lived pain, reckoning with the generational trauma that led her and her siblings to "[forge] bonds with the outside world and [abandon] each other." Singh turns her focus to the corporeal, recognizing the indelible ways her body has experienced life, and as a result, been broken and remade. Juxtaposing her lifelong health challenges and Brownness with the joy of her pregnancy—all housed in her body—Singh reckons with the breaks her body has endured, and the transformation that follows.

While much of the essay was written before the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial reckoning that occurred in summer 2020, Singh concludes *The Breaks* with reflections on the impact of these world-altering events from the vantage point of her family's life in downtown Richmond, Virginia, an epicenter of antiracist protest. She recounts how a colleague once impressed upon her students that "even when protests appear to have no political effect, there is a crucial *feeling* in the act of gathering, of being together in a set of beliefs despite all other differences, that can be vital to bolstering individuals in times of crisis" (113). Singh acknowledges the challenges to those gatherings: a pandemic, racial divisions, space itself; nonetheless, she sees "promise in [her daughter's] ability to craft kinships, to be a support for and supported by the worlds [she helps] shape, however unconventional they may be" (119). Despite the harm and violence of the last two years, Singh remains hopeful that "the pandemic is hailing us toward an ethics that is so much wider and more capacious than we have known" (147). *The Breaks* is more than a love letter

to her daughter, more than a memoir, more than a reflection on the current historical moment; through dazzling prose, transcendent structure, and wide-reaching theory, Singh offers us guidance on how to navigate the world we live in and map out a new one. In the wake of a torrent of institutional violence towards marginalized people, *The Breaks* shows us how to break from it and build something better. *The Breaks* is a genre-bending work of nonfiction, contributing productively to queer studies and public humanities while remaining accessible to non-academic audiences. Ethnographers, queer historians, ethnic studies scholars, and anyone invested in radical parenthood will find this book generative for their thinking and writing.

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